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TS 106128
SNIE 13-10-70
11 June 1970

SPECIAL
NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

Number 13-10-70

Chinese Reactions
to Certain Courses of Action in
Indochina

Submitted by



DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

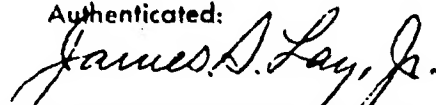
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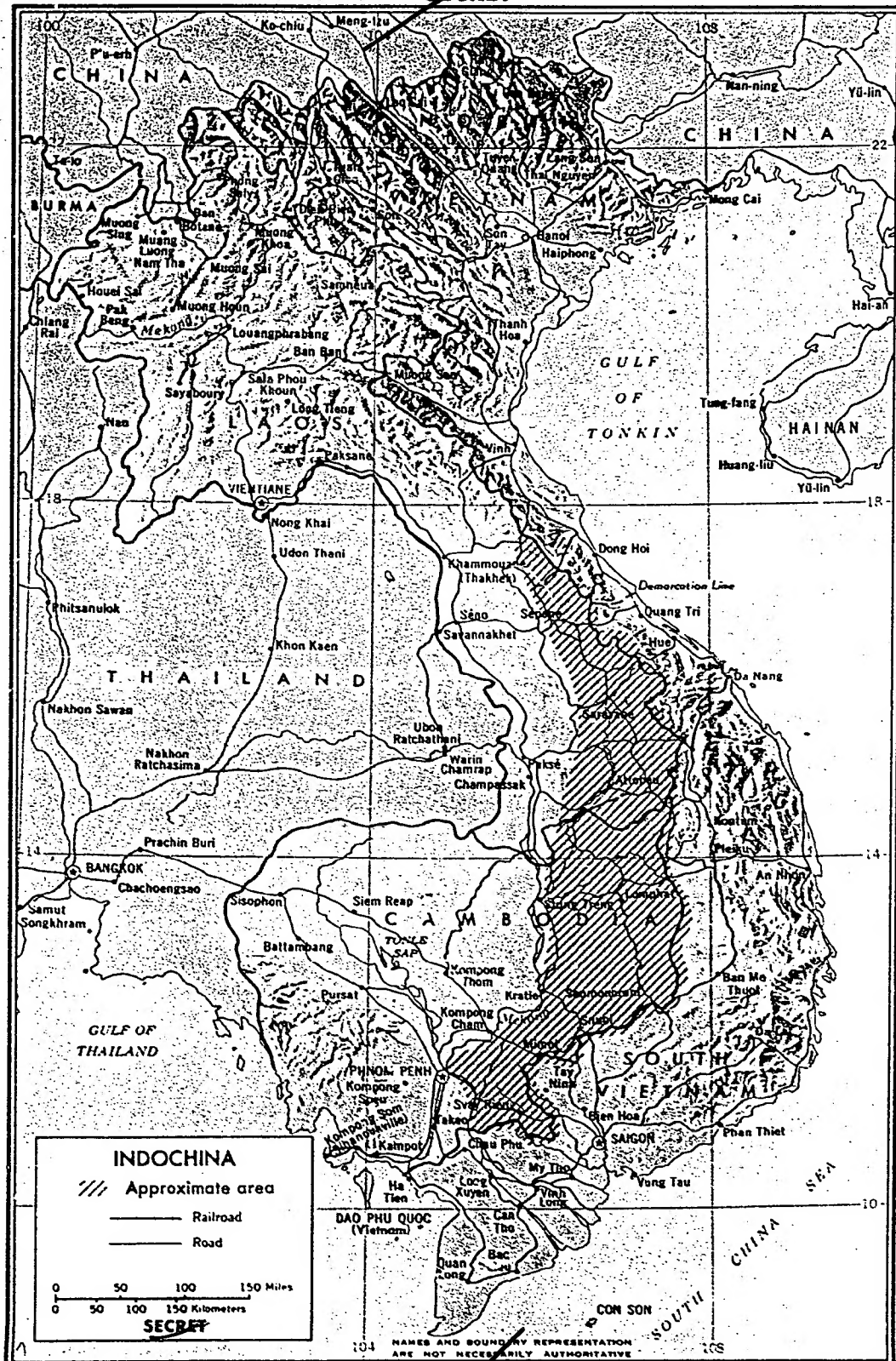
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TS 186128

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

11 June 1970

SUBJECT: SNIE 13-10-70: CHINESE REACTIONS TO CERTAIN COURSES OF
ACTION IN INDOCHINA

NOTE

The changing character of the struggle in Indochina has raised again the question of Chinese responses to postulated developments there. This paper considers how the Chinese might react to guerrilla operations by small units of indigenous Southeast Asians,* designed to cut communist supply lines in certain areas of northwestern South Vietnam, southern Laos, and northeastern Cambodia. US participation would be limited to training and air support. In particular, the paper assesses the likelihood of the Chinese using "volunteers" in response to successful guerrilla operations to interdict communist lines of communication in this area.

This paper does not attempt to describe the extent of Chinese Communist capabilities to conduct conventional or guerrilla type military operations in Indochina.

THE ESTIMATE

I. PEKING'S GENERAL VIEW OF THE STRUGGLE IN INDOCHINA

1. From the outset of armed struggle in Vietnam, Peking has set cautious limits on its own role in the Indochina conflict. Chinese

* Specifically, Thai, South Vietnamese, Cambodians, Lao, and local tribal groups.

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statements have made clear that the fighting is a test of Mao's theory of "people's war." They have consistently advised the communists in Indochina to persist in self-reliant and protracted warfare and to prepare for a long and costly struggle before eventual victory. They believe a victory achieved in this way would enhance their claims for ideological pre-eminence over the Soviet Union and strengthen their political influence in Asia. Thus, Peking's policy has been to rule out any use of Chinese troops in the ground fighting and to limit the risks of even an accidental confrontation with the US. The involvement of Chinese forces in the struggle has been limited to construction and anti-aircraft missions in North Vietnam and in northwestern Laos. Some 40,000 to 50,000 Chinese have in the past performed such missions in North Vietnam. China has built roads from its own territory into Laos, and currently has within northwestern Laos some 10,000 to 14,000 troops in engineering, anti-aircraft artillery, and security units. China's troubled internal situation and its unresolved problems with the USSR will probably incline its leaders to continue making cautious calculations of risk.

2. Recent developments in Cambodia do not appear to have changed this basic approach. So long as Allied moves do not critically affect Hanoi's ability to continue the war, Peking is likely to minimize the

- 2 -

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threat to its own interests and to interpret new Allied initiatives as further evidence that the US is getting more and more bogged down in an expanding war. Peking has consistently asserted, and appears to believe, that the US is fighting a losing war in which Hanoi has only to be patient and persevere in order to outlast the US. To help Hanoi preserve that patience, China will continue to supply North Vietnam with economic and military aid. But in this process Peking will remain careful to keep its support indirect and its forces out of the line of fire. In this connection we have observed no significant changes in the essentially defensive posture of Chinese military forces in south China that would suggest a major shift in Peking's assessment of the Indochina conflict.

3. The many recent reports that Chinese troops have already intervened or are about to intervene in the Indochina fighting do not stand up under careful analysis. They lack internal consistency, come from untested or clearly unreliable sources, or are deprived from obvious rumors or unfounded speculation. No credible source has actually sighted Chinese troops either in Cambodia or Southern Laos and no Chinese bodies or prisoners have been taken to date. We expect further such reports, however, because the communists are aware that even rumors of Chinese intervention have considerable psychological impact; because the many ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia complicate the

- 3 -

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identification problem; and finally, because a matter of such import is bound to generate widespread speculation and conjecture among the peoples of Indochina. Improbable as they may be, such reports can not be ignored, and will call for careful checking.

II. CHINESE REACTION TO THE USE OF INDIGENOUS GUERRILLAS IN ATTEMPTS TO DISRUPT COMMUNIST SUPPLY LINES

4. Peking's basic approach described above would, we believe, determine its reactions to any attempts by the Allies to use Southeast Asian guerrilla forces for the purpose of harassing communist supply lines in southern Laos, northwestern South Vietnam, and northeastern Cambodia. Thus, Peking's initial reaction to the operations of such units would probably be low key. In the past China has reacted directly only to threats to its immediate border regions and the area under discussion here is well removed from the Chinese border. Moreover, the Chinese would probably see the action for what it was, an effort to cut the logistics flow southward, and not a threat to northern Laos or North Vietnam itself. In their propaganda, they would describe it as further evidence of US intent to shift the burden of fighting to surrogate forces. Peking already charges the US with using "Asians to fight Asians" and the Allied employment of indigenous groups for guerrilla

- 4 -

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action would not be seen in Peking as a major departure from what they already assume to be US/Allied policy. In short, Peking's awareness of the addition of such small units to the fighting in Indochina would probably not lead to courses of action other than more propaganda and the usual reassurances to Hanoi.

5. If the guerrilla operations began to disrupt the flow of supplies, Peking would tend to see this as simply requiring stronger reaction on the part of Hanoi in defending its lines of communication. Peking would, of course, offer further supplies of arms and equipment to allay whatever apprehension Hanoi felt. But we believe that North Vietnam has sufficient manpower resources of its own to cope, at least initially, with the disruptive effects of guerrilla operations.

6. Should the added effect of guerrilla operations come to pose a more serious threat to VC/NVA supply lines, despite the initial communist counteractions, we believe Hanoi would commit more of its own available military strength rather than call for Chinese troops, even in the guise of "volunteers." We remain convinced that Hanoi would be most reluctant to invite Chinese forces into its "liberation" war unless the security of North Vietnam was itself critically threatened. For its part, Peking would probably calculate that the dispatch of

- 5 -

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"volunteers" in any number would soon become apparent and would involve risks of confrontation with US forces. Peking may believe that the odds of the US taking any serious retaliatory action are diminishing; nonetheless, in view of its other problems we doubt that the Chinese would wish to become directly involved in such a potentially complicated situation unless the security of North Vietnam were itself at stake.

* * * * *

7. Peking would, of course, remain alert to the possibility that the activity discussed above presaged a larger scale and more formal Allied military effort in Laos. Peking's concern over this possibility would increase if the Allied action was announced publicly and in such a way as to imply the beginnings of a US-supported Southeast Asian military alliance. Peking might feel it advisable in these circumstances to attempt to forestall any such action by intensifying its threats against the participating Asian nations.

- 6 -

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